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# The Workshop

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## ON COLOR.\*

By LUDWIG PFAU.

### II.

As with the development of taste in the human race, so also with the progressive creations of nature, there is ever going on a battle between the colors, in which the particular and distinct objects endeavour to gain the ascendancy by exuberance of color, while the really great and entire aim at harmony and perfection, and controlling individual excesses by powerful general effects. Civilisation, when it leaves the splendor and display of the primitive colors for the collective, finds itself carried away by the stream of the general law of development, and achieves a reformation which is a decided improvement. Not indeed that by cultivation man loses all sense for splendor of color, but that he gains an eye for the value of different shades, and especially an understanding of the delicacy of gradations, which is more or less deficient in the uneducated, not only in the case of colors, but in all creations of beauty. Indeed it is with our sense of color as with our other educated senses, the wild is more akin to us than the civilized, and the preference for the primitive is still too much in the ascendant for any hope of a speedy escape from our want of taste in color. Well may even æsthetic artists and critics deplore the disappearance of all brilliancy of color from modern life. But when even professional men show so little understanding of the subject, it is no wonder that the laity do not comprehend the delicate shades of collective color, and take the most glaring hues for the most beautiful.

As a principle we may consider blue, red and yellow, as respectively the colors proper to the mineral, animal and vegetable kingdoms. The mixed tints which form the transitions are distributed between the approximating original colors, and if in the vegetable creation the green mixed tint prevails, it is because the blue, being by far the darker pigment, develops a greater coloring power than the lighter yellow, which changes into green at the smallest admixture of blue. And this effect is so powerful that no one would suspect in the green a mixture of blue and yellow, whereas in all other mixed colors the combination is immediately recognised.

That the animal color, viz red, should be the most suitable to the animal kingdom is not to be wondered at, and so, in general, it harmonises also with our views with regard to material objects. Besides this, instinct has long ago recognised red as the color of animated nature, and purple as the supremely splendid. This latter, a dark, but fiery and violet-tinted red, is primitive enough in its character for the darkest colorisation, and collective enough for the lightest; because being a red of the highest power it harmonises with the skin by its tint, and contrasts with it by its depth.

It is not uninteresting to remark how, from the very earliest times, the lovers of pomp have contended for the red, while royalty has appropriated the purple. Both in the oldest Indian and Chinese books, as well as in the Bible, purple appears as the insignia of the highest power. In certain festivals, Jupiter, together with some of the other heathen deities, was draped in red, and in their triumphal processions the victors, following the example of their gods, daubed their whole bodies with the same color. The kings of Media and

\* Concluded from p. 97 ante.  
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Assyria also painted their faces red, a practice analogous to the tattooing of savages. Tullus Hostilius transplanted the red from his skin to his robe, and on the overthrow of the Etruscans, adopted the purple as the token of triumph. Julius Cæsar was the first who forbade the use of the purple to other mortals, which was indeed but just, for he had sacrificed a million of lives to earn the right to do so. Nero, still more jealous of his blood-colored robe, seeing one day in the theatre a noble lady dressed in showy purple, ordered her to be dragged upon the stage and stripped of her dress, and then confiscated her property so that she might not purchase another. Several Emperors sent dyers to Persia where the finest purple was produced, but the Persians would not impart the mystery of their craft, so that the masters of the world were obliged to contend themselves with a more ordinary red. When the Roman empire was falling into decay, the emperors insisted on their prerogative red with a pertinacity which they would have done better to have displayed in the defence of their country. In the year 424 Theodosius published an edict which summoned every person who possessed purple robes, or even robes trimmed with purple, to deliver them up to the imperial treasury on pain of death for the crime of lese-majesty. Arcadius and Honorius threatened with the same punishment all who dyed any stuff with false purple. These two sons of Theodosius lost England, France and Spain to the barbarians. Alaric made himself master of Rome, but what mattered it? the purple is saved. In the middle ages the Church could not fail to appropriate to herself this ancient symbol of power, but the white robed Pope was clearsighted enough to leave the purple to his court, and invest his cardinals with it. When in the sixteenth century, the kings wanted to re-inforce the prohibition it was too late. Charles IX. of delightful memory indeed proscribed the use of purple, crimson and violet. Parliaments and even councils frequently renewed the prohibition, but in vain, and when Louis XIV. would have something exclusive he was obliged to adopt blue for the royal color. From this time the red has abandoned the monarchy, and fought exclusively on the side of the republic. On the whole we perceive how red, notwithstanding the preference it has enjoyed, was by degrees pressed back into the somewhat more remote circles of mankind; and it cannot be denied, that, since the time when the kings of Media and Assyria illuminated themselves, the world has made some progress in the application of color.

It is easy to understand that any observation on color can only have a general significance, for the smallest difference in the tone of a color is of too great an influence as to harmony, for any positive rules to be enunciated for individual shading. Every color would be void of beauty if it were alone in the world, and all are beautiful if in harmonious relation to one another; but the production of this harmony is just the difficulty under which our artists and especially our Art-Industry labor. It is indeed decided that the so-called supplemental colors, those, that is, which reciprocally repro-

duce the white light, such as violet and yellow, blue and orange, green and red, become the means of a harmonious connexion; but this decision has neither a mathematical importance nor any æsthetic value, for where the supplemental colors cease the confusion of color commences. As to the first, the harmony of light not being limited to two colors only, we might expect that the three primitive colors, red, yellow and blue, would form an agreeable combination; but it is just these three which harmonise the least with one another, although the bright yellow which occupies the middle place harmonises better with the cold blue than with the warm red. It is therefore not to be wondered at that these three unite most readily with their supplemental colors, because they constitute that melange of color to which the former do not contribute. Yellow therefore harmonises less with orange and green, because it is itself contained in both, and with blue and red because these equally with itself are primitives: on the other hand it harmonises better with violet as containing no yellow, and being itself a compound. The three mixed colors harmonise better with one another, as is natural, since they can be more properly arranged on either one or the other side; and the more mixture and blending are employed, the greater is the harmony produced. The complement theory has especial bearing only to the purely spectral tints, for the more delicate gradations and richer coloring show plainly that these tints may harmonise perfectly without being strictly subjected to the theory of supplemental colors. The laws of harmony therefore may be thus enunciated in their simple generality: entire colors unite better with mixed, and mixed with entire, than with one another; both have less affinity for those closely related to them than for those that are not so related: mixed colors can support juxta-position better than entire ones, and even harmonise when duly blended. This is indeed but the ABC of the art, for when the difficulty, i. e., the finding of the right degree of gradation, begins, then the rule ceases to be binding. Art and nature indeed practically point out to us, by their placing together all possible colors in perfect harmony, that the resulting effect is due more to the juxta-position of appropriate pigments and their gradation than to any mathematical rules of science.

With regard to the general law of blending, we must always bear in mind that the effect of colorisation is produced on the one hand by similarity and on the other by dissimilarity, and that harmony is merely the equipoise of this contrast. If it is our object to enhance the value of a tint by the assistance of its surroundings, we must avoid every false contrast which would relieve it disagreeably; nor should a true contrast be too much heightened, else the coloring, though indeed appearing stronger, would be too much isolated and would thus lose all its harmony. It is as with the thirds and fifths in music which are more effective together than other tones which are so far apart that they lose all relation to one another. The accessories must have so much relationship to the principal tint, as in a certain degree

to contain it, but not so much as to coincide with it. The more complex and delicate the variegated colors of a pattern are, the duller and more opposed to them should be the groundwork and the adjacent parts, and conversely, a delicately variegated ground cannot bear primitive colors of too pronounced a character without losing all effect of harmony.

However desirable it may be to dispense with striking colors for all articles of dress which come into close contact with the human figure, on account of their tendency to obscure the brilliancy of the flesh instead of enhancing it; in curtains, paperhangings and carpets, and especially in any objects which constitute the more distant accessories of humanity the brightest colors may successfully be employed. But here also it is by no means advisable to injure the figure by the background, or to fatigue the eye by glaring daubs of color instead of enlivening it by delicate and beautiful patterns. And in this respect, to return once more to our starting point, we cannot be too careful to take nature for our guide. With respect to color indeed, as to form, not every individual phenomenon is to be selected as a model, but to be considered only as part of the great work of creation. With wise economy does nature employ her gorgeous colors for ornamental purposes, and by lighting up the dull masses with brilliant gleams of beauty, she inculcates on us the lesson that we should not be too lavish in using brilliant colors, but distribute their splendors with due taste and artistic understanding. For as the collective colors produce their effect by their mass, the primitive ones produce theirs by their distribution, and bear the same relation to the former as ornament to surface. And we must not forget that however important the task of ornamentation may be, it is never the principal point, but only a means to enhance the intrinsic worth of the whole, and to impart to it its full and proper value.

But in this respect we find ourselves totally at variance with this principle, for the most recent scientific productions of color have given us a set of glowing tints, the lustre of which is very injurious to the general effect. These aniline colors are utterly abominable as the negation of all harmony, and the most faded tints would be by far the most advantageous. The primitive colors, especially where they come into contact with the human figure, ought not only to be blended, to a degree equal at least to that of the purple, but should be in themselves entirely free from all hardness. For

together with the gradation of tints, the nature of the pigment exercises an intensifying or a softening influence. It is not without reason that artists and connoisseurs show so great a preference for the faded gobelins and pale tapestries: with us it requires the compensating pallet of time to harmonise the colors until we have learnt ourselves to imitate its work. And this would be by far more desirable, for time, while it takes away the rawness of a tint, generally diminishes its strength simultaneously with it.

But unfortunately in Western Europe the taste of the weaver is still very depraved. Even textile art in France, superior as it is in perception of color to the rest of Europe, still bears the stamp of infancy in comparison with the countries of the east whose specimens in the great Paris exhibition of 1867 acted like a revelation. They possess in the highest degree that coloristic excellence in which Western Europe is so deficient. Especially they never overload their surfaces with pictorial representations and shaded plastic objects, which produce such a disagreeable contrast between the purpose of the work and its ornamentation. They exclude organic nature, and with it the stiff architectonic arabesque. Thus the design never oversteps the limits of surface ornament, and the mosaic geometrical pattern leaves the color every liberty to adopt the most beautiful harmonies, a liberty which it well knows how to take advantage of. Even the Venetian painters have hardly been so successful as the weavers of the East in the art of blending beauty and brilliancy of color.

The most beautiful specimens of this kind rest on the principle illustrated by the Indian shawl patterns, in which the colors are so arranged that their variety produces a general harmonious effect. Occupying a middle position between mosaic and surface ornament, they owe their charm to a certain regular recurrence of ornamental figures which however imparts to the design an undefined character which reminds one of the speckled flowers of some of the orchistride or the pearly plumage of certain birds. From the examples we have produced from art or from nature there results so much in general for the harmony of colors, that the primitive colors increase their power and significance by a wise restriction in their use; that they can only duly unfold their lustre in contrast to delicate mixtures, and that, æsthetically considered, their purpose is especially to enhance by contrast the value of the collective colors.